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# Why You Need a Summer Plan

Gizem Karaali  
*Pomona College*

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## Why You Need a Summer Plan

Posted on 05/23/2014 by [gkaraali](#)

The AMS e-mentoring blog has already celebrated the finals week with [Dagan Karp's tips](#). If you are an instructor, this will mean that you have a few hours (or days) of intense grading work, and then the semester is over. And what happens after? Are you supposed to simply sit back, relax, and wait around until the fall semester rolls around? Maybe find a comfy seat on a beach somewhere to lounge around, sipping a cool drink? Maybe you will read the best seller that you purchased at the airport bookstore as you were on your way to that beach? Go to bed late and wake up late and just enjoy the summer? Isn't summer the time to be lazy? Many non-academics think that us university folk simply quit working when the finals are over and it is one long party season till Labor Day.

If you are like all the graduate students, postdocs, or junior and not-so-junior faculty members I know, then this is probably not your summer. Some of you are gearing up to teach summer school. So there are lectures to prepare, textbooks to pick, homework assignments to develop. Some have a series of conferences to go to and several presentations to prepare. [MathFest](#), [the joint statistical meetings](#), and [the SIAM annual meeting](#) are always fun to attend, but we all know it takes serious effort to do good presentations. And then there are many other more specialized conferences...

Whatever your other plans are, almost all of you also have grand plans for work this summer. This summer will be when you finish the dissertation. This summer will be when you send in that grant proposal. This summer will be when you wrap up the work on those two papers hanging over your head for the last two semesters. This summer ...

I am sure you get the point. The summer is often a dreamland for the graduate students and the junior faculty members who are burnt out from the day-to-day stresses of teaching (and yes, even those of us who love teaching and who admire and respect our students occasionally get exhausted). The summer is the time when she will finally get to focus on her thesis, when he will wrap up his grant proposal, when she will make serious headway on her tenure packet. The summer is going to involve no committee meetings, no department meetings. Unless there is summer school teaching in the picture, there will also be no office hours, no regular class meetings, no students that want extra credit, no midnight emails that require immediate reply or else the sending student will explode. The summer, for most of us academics, is a large chunk of unstructured time when we can focus on our research and make substantial progress toward our goals.

Now all of the above is true. However somehow when September comes around, many of these dreams are not realized. Many graduate students wonder just what happened to the three long months which were ahead of them in May that somehow evaporated with nothing to show for them. Many junior and not-so-junior faculty members come back to the department common room, complaining about how the papers did not get written, the grants did not get submitted, and the tenure packet still remains on the to-do list. So why does this seem to always happen? And how can we avoid it this summer?

In the last decade, for many times, I have tasted first-hand the end-of-summer blues I described above. I have spent many early spring months dreaming of all that I would be doing when the summer arrives, only to realize

that it was already September and I had not much to show for for the months in between. I have also observed many of my peers going through similar things, and I just assumed for years that this was how it had to be. But then some time in the middle of the tenure track, I decided to try approaching my career a bit more systematically, to see if I could improve the way I was doing things. Since then I have read everything under the sun written about time management, productivity, and faculty work, sometimes in place of doing my own work (the literature on these is vast and quite engaging; delving in it is in fact a great way to procrastinate, so I do not recommend it to most people 😊 I have written before about [one of the things I learned](#) from all that I read and all that I have tried. In this post I want to share with you a second tip, that might help you avoid the end-of-summer blues, once and for all.

The reasons why we dream so much about the summer are precisely the reasons why we end up not achieving much during it. The summer is for most of us unstructured time, and it is much easier for unstructured time to slip away from our fingers. We are not explicitly required to do much too specific, and this leads to a lack of focus. We have no specific deadlines, so we end up with one mind-numbingly low-energy day after another. We feel like we should be resting and we feel justified to take it slow every now and then, but then there seems to be no reason to make things go faster. And then we are blindsided once again by September rolling in to announce the new academic year.

So what is the panacea? It is simple really, so simple that once again it will probably require you to take a leap of faith to give it a try. The solution to the problem of having summers get away from you with nothing to show for them is to make a plan. Translate those dreams to concrete plans first. And then you got to stick to it. But that is another story. Let us here focus on the making of the plan.

Say you want to give me the benefit of the doubt and give this summer planning a try. How do you go about doing it? The best way to make a summer plan, in my opinion, is summarized by KerryAnn Rocquemore in her InsidehigherEd article [No More Post-Summer Regret](#). Rocquemore starts her piece with a summary of why the summer presents unique challenges for most of us. And then she jumps right in. In the course of her brief article she tells you about the five steps to making a plan and getting the most out of your summer. I learned from her how to make my summers more productive and perhaps surprisingly even more enjoyable (who would have thunk it? us academics actually *enjoy* working on our stuff!)

For those who are up for the planning I strongly recommend Rocquemore's article for guidance. (Keep in mind that you have nothing to lose if you just give it a try.) If you need more convincing though, I can tell you a bit more about my own summers.

During the last years of graduate school I taught summer school for three summers in a row. The teaching somehow expanded to fill all the time I had, and at the end of those summers, not only was I exhausted, but also extremely frustrated, because I had not made any progress on my work. During my two years as a postdoc, I spent one summer simply daydreaming and goofing around; the other summer was mainly dedicated to moving to my tenure track job. On the tenure track, my first two summers were wasted, again. I traveled to conferences, met new people, and started new projects. However nothing really got completed.

Then I started my reading and yes, I am not too embarrassed to admit, my "self-help journey". I learned then about the importance of [SMART goals](#), about [the important-versus-urgent matrix](#), and many other themes of time management, which are aptly summarized in [the eponymous Wikipedia article](#). But the theory was not sufficient

for me. I needed some more guidance on how to actually implement these ideas into my own life. And then I discovered [KerryAnn Rocquemore's entries on InsideHigherEd](#).

The first summer I used a summer plan, I did not write five articles or get a grant. But I did feel a sense of accomplishment and a sense of satisfaction with what I had achieved when September arrived. I have also noticed that in the long run, all the things I have accomplished did add up.

Planning and then sticking to the plan may not be as sexy as “*work only when you are inspired and your genius will come through!*” But I am inclined to think that there are much fewer geniuses in today’s world of mathematics than we would like to think (and apparently even geniuses work very hard, and quite systematically, to get to the point where they are finally celebrated as geniuses; see for instance *Chapter 9: Perspiration and Inspiration* of Andrew Robinson’s [Genius: A Very Short Introduction](#)). And most of the rest of us benefit immensely from going about our business with a sense of purpose and solid work ethic. Work, at least our kind of work, when done regularly becomes joyful and energizing. A good summer plan can just be the right stepping stone, just what you need, to make this summer be the time when you find your groove.

[Gizem Karaali](#) is associate professor of mathematics at Pomona College and a founding editor of the [Journal of Humanistic Mathematics](#). Since May 2013, she is also the associate editor of the [Mathematical Intelligencer](#).



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